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April 2, 2014

By BRIAN ROSS, MEGAN CHUCHMACH, MATTHEW MOSK and RHONDA SCHWARTZ via **WORLD NEWS**

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Senator: Coal Boss Has 'Blood on His Hands' in Mining Disaster

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Four years into the criminal investigation of the nation's worst mining disaster in decades, federal officials told ABC News that prosecutors are now focused on the role of West Virginia coal boss Donald L. Blankenship.

"I believe this permeated from the top down – from Don Blankenship down," said U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.V., who was governor at the time of the blast. "I believe that Don has blood on his hands. And I believe that justice will be done."

Pressure has been steadily increasing for prosecutors to make their move against the controversial former chief executive of Massey Energy, which owned and operated the Upper Big Branch mine when 29 coal workers were **killed in an explosion** in April 2010.

WATCH the full Brian Ross report on ABC News' "World News With Diane Sawyer" and "Nightline" tonight.

Federal officials have prosecuted four Massey employees -- most recently exacting a guilty plea from a high ranking official who acknowledged that the company employed a practice of tipping off mine workers when a safety inspector was coming onto the site.

U.S. Attorney R. Booth Goodwin II told ABC News that prosecutions to date show his office has been methodically going "up the line, and consistently so" in assessing whether conduct by mine operators may have led to the explosion.

"What we have seen is a conspiracy to violate mine safety and health laws," Goodwin said. "And that conspiracy was very pervasive."

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Official state and federal investigations into the tragedy have already concluded that loss of life could have been avoided had the mine been operated more safely.

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Families of the victims, angered by the slow pace of the criminal probe, held a rally in front of the federal court house Wednesday demanding justice in the case.

Meanwhile, Blankenship has launched a preemptive public relations onslaught, releasing a 50-minute film called "Never Again" which offers what he says is proof that the explosion was the result of an unexpected surge of natural gas into the mine shaft – not the result of safety deficiencies.

In an hour-long interview with ABC News, portions of which will be broadcast tonight on "World News With Diane Sawyer" and "Nightline," Blankenship argued that scientific evidence will vindicate him.

"No one ever did more for improving or trying to improve safety," Blankenship said.

In the film, and in interviews he is giving this week, Blankenship speaks at length about his views on the mining disaster, focusing attention on what he believes are shortcomings by federal regulators who could be doing more to make mines more safe.

The public relations offensive comes after Blankenship refused to participate in the official state and federal investigations into the disaster – with his lawyer invoking his fifth amendment rights in a letter to investigators. Blankenship told ABC News he declined to meet with investigators because he did not believe they would treat him fairly.

"Because the people doing the investigating were also doing the regulating and the inspecting," he said. "And when you're investigating yourself, it's not going to be a fair investigation."

Blankenship has long been a larger-than-life figure in West Virginia, where he was once accused of making campaign donations to try and **tilt the balance of the state supreme court** in his favor, and where his strong-fisted leadership of the giant coal conglomerate made him both famous and feared.

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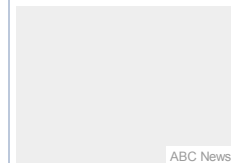


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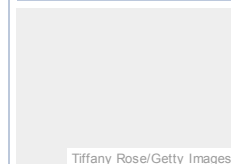
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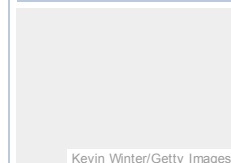
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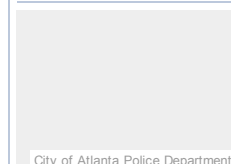
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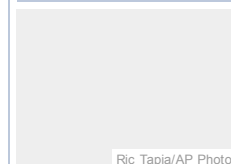
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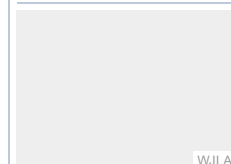
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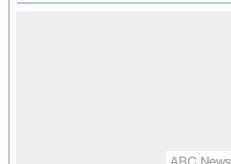
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